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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between parents' attitudes toward their child, themselves, childrearing and their marriage, and their child's self concept. The subjects were 62 middle class preschool children (3-1/2 to 5 years old) and their parents. The instruments used in the interviews with the children and their parents were (1) the Brown IDS Self-Concept Referents Test as a measure of the child's self concept; (2) Gordon's Use of Parental Authority scale, which asks parents to describe their use of authority, as a measure of the kind and amount of authority exercised by the parents; and (3) two 6-item attitude scales as measures of parents' attitudes toward their children and themselves. It was found that mothers who advocated more control tended to have sons with higher self concepts, that both mothers and fathers of girls advocated significantly more control than mothers and fathers of boys, and that significant negative relationships were found between the boys' self concept measure and the mothers' ratings of both their boys and themselves. The discussion of the results includes comments on the possible causal relationship of marital satisfaction to use of authority and to self concept. Data are presented in three tables. (Author/BH)

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Parental Attitudes and the Pre-School Child's Self-Concept

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Parental Attitudes and the Preschool Child's Self-Concept

Parents' attitudes toward child, self, childrearing and their marriage was related to their child's self-concept. The 62 preschool children studied were attending two university nursery schools and were from middle-class homes. Significant relationships (p. .05) were found between parents of boys attitudes toward use of parental control for boys. Mothers who advocated more control tended to have sons with higher self-concepts. Both mothers and fathers of girls advocated significantly (p. .05) more control than mothers and fathers of boys. A significant negative relationship (p. .05) was found between both the mother's ratings of her boys and of her self with the self-concept measure of the boys.

Researchers have often attempted to determine the relationship between parental attitudes and their child's self-concept. Several researchers have put their emphasis on the social learning theory (Bandura and Walters, 1963; Bandura and Kupers, 1964; Bandura, 1969), which emphasizes the child's modeling of the parents behavior. This theory suggests that a child's self-concept is positively related to parental self-concept. Other researchers have emphasized the "looking-glass" theory (Cooley, 1902; Gecas, V., Calonico, J.M., & Thomas, D.L., 1974) which related the parents perceptions and treatment of their children to their children's self-concept. In essence the "looking-glass" and the "modeling" theory are probably both factors in the formation of the child's self-concept. The present study will examine the relationship between the parent's attitudes toward use of authority and their child's self-concept. Also the interlation between these variables and the parent's marital satisfaction, their self-concept, and their concept of child were examined. It is hypothesized that these attitudes would reflect on many of the ingredients of the "looking-glass," and "social learning" theories of self-concept development.

Tacco and Bridges (1973) investigated the relationship of self-concept measures of mothers and their 323 children attending a follow through program. A canonical correlational analysis of the set of children's and mother's measures indicated that the mothers' self-concept measures were significantly related (r=.33) to children's self-concept measures. Taub (1973) investigated the relationship among spouses' self-concepts and their children's. Parental self-concepts were assessed with the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale. A significant relationship was found between the mother's and child's self-concept (r=.27) and between the father's and the child's self-concept (r=.34).

Both of these studies indicate a modest relationship exists between parental self-concept and the child's self-concept but do not reveal the inter-relationship of the variables with the parent's attitude toward use of authority.

Gordon's (1970) Parent Effectiveness Training Program stresses that parent's use of authority to control children's behavior is not only ineffective but harmful to the child. According to Gordon, children become cowed and fearful as the result of parental use of authority; thus, the more parental authority exerted the more likely it would be to have a harmful effect on the child's self-concept. Gordon in his text includes a scale to measure parents use of authority. In Gordon's view, the use of positive control (e.g. praise, approval, concrete reinforcement) is just as harmful as negative control (e.g. punishment). His scale, which will be used in the present study, has scoring for both the use of positive control and negative control along with a total score for both types of control. According to Gordon, parents who use either kind of authority will tend to have children with poor self-concepts.

Gordon's position regarding harmful results of parental control is not supported by the research findings of Coopersmith (1967). Coopersmith studied a large number of pre-adolescent boys and their parents in an attempt to identify the antecedents of self-esteem. Boys with high self-esteem had parents who were high in self-esteem, were self-reliant and emotionally stable. These parents had relatively high expectations for their sons and provided consistent encouragement and support. Mothers of high self-esteem boys were more likely than mothers of low self-esteem boys to establish rules and to enforce them consistently. Their preferred mode of influencing their children was by rewarding desired behavior; however, they also used

punishment. When punishment was judged necessary, it was usually administered by the father and perceived as justified by high self-esteem boys. In contrast, harsh and disrespectful treatment characterized parental disciplinary practices for low self-esteem boys. Rather than using reward to promote desired behaviors, parents of low self-esteem boys favored practices characterized by force and threats of loss of love.

The relationship between the parents' marital satisfaction and the child's self-concept has not been investigated. There is however, increasing evidence that the arrival of children in a family is detrimental to marriage satisfaction (Burr, 1970). The degree of this dissatisfaction is certain to have some effect on the child, but in what area and to what extent is not yet known. However, Cox (1966), in a study of sixth, seventh, and eighth grades noted that low self-concept correlated with parental rejection and family tension.

Method

The subjects were 62 nursery school children (34 girls, 28 boys) attending a university nursery school. Approximately 50 percent of the children's parents were associated with the university either as students or faculty and 50 percent of the parents were middle-class townspeople. The children in the study ranged in age from 3½ to 5 years of age.

The Brown IDS Self-Concept Referents Test was administered to the children during the Spring Semester. Measures obtained from the parents were obtained from trained interviewers in the parents' homes. Each parent was given the questionnaires separately and the data was placed in an envelope and sealed immediately after the parents completed the forms to assure the parents of the complete confidentiality of the information.

Instruments

The measure of self-concept used in the study was the Brown IDS Self-Concept Referents Test developed in 1966 by Bert Brown of the Institute for Developmental Studies at New York University. This measure utilizes 16 bi-polar questions to ascertain the child's reported concept of himself. In the test, a Poloroid picture is taken of the child, after which the child is presented with 15 questions concerning the child in the picture. The test is then scored for 0 to 15 points, with the more socially desirable choice scored as "1", and the less socially desirable choice scored as "0". The following is an example of the questions asked the child:

Is (Child's Name) (point to picture) Happy____or is he/she sad____?

Other_____

The instrument requires approximately 5 minutes to administer and is well within the attention span of nursery school children. The retest reliability was .74 for a group of 31 nursery school children retested a week after the first administration. Utilized in previous studies by this writer the Brown IDS demonstrated acceptable validity (Flynn, 1974 and 1975).

The measure of use of parental authority was Gordon's Use of Parental Authority taken from his Parent Effectiveness Training (1970) text. Three scores are obtained from this scale; use of punishment, use of reward and use of both kinds of power. An example of an item on the scale is given below:

Require your 10-year-old child to ask permission to speak when he is in a gathering of adults. U L ? By circling the U, you are unlikely to require this.

The retest reliability on a group of 30 parents (15 mothers and 15 fathers) approximately a week apart revealed a reliability coefficient of

.80 for the total score with a .78 for the use of punishment and .81 for use of reward.

The parent's rating of their child and their self was obtained from two 6 item scales, each with 3 choices: below average (0), average (1), and above average (2). The parent's were asked the following two questions for each of the six characteristics:

A. parent's rating of child's_____compared to other children they know.

B. each parent's rating of their own_____compared to other adults they know.

The following six characteristics were inserted in both A and B: (1) appearance, (2) behavior, (3) intelligence, (4) warmth, (5) sociability, (6) independence. The possible score range for both the A and the B ratings was .74, while for their self evaluation it was .71.

Results

The data was analyzed using the SPSS (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbremmer, and Bent, 1975) correlation program. Since the data was analyzed separately for the boys and the girls, the resulting sample sizes were too small to conduct a multiple regression analysis for the subsamples. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the boys and girls on the variables investigated.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Boys and Girls

Variables	Boys (N=28)		Girls (N=34)	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-Concept	6.43	7.09	6.67	7.01
Mother & Father Marital Satisfaction	.72	.26	1.00	0.00
Mother's Discipline				
Punishment	9.54	1.79	11.56	2.81
Reward	9.64	2.95	10.18	3.39
Punishment & Reward	19.18	3.20	21.73	4.66
Father's Discipline				
Punishment	10.39	4.53	11.44	3.30
Reward	6.64	2.47	9.50	4.59
Punishment & Reward	17.04	6.34	20.94	5.78
Mother's Concept of Child	9.14	1.21	9.18	1.45
Mother's Self-Concept	8.32	1.98	7.53	1.78
Father's Concept of Child	7.57	2.80	9.03	1.42
Father's Self-Concept	8.07	2.94	7.83	2.34

In examining the means a significant ($p. < .05$) difference was found between parents' report on their use of control (punishment and reward) with girls than boys. Fathers of girls advocated significantly more control than fathers of boys, just as mothers of girls advocated significantly more control than mothers of boys. Fathers of girls rated them significantly ($p < .05$) higher than fathers of boys on the parent's evaluation of their children.

The intercorrelations between the variables for both boys and girls are presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

*(Significant at .05 level)

Table 2 and Table 3

Table 2

Intercorrelations of Variables for Boys (N=28)

Variables	Variables (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Self-Concept (1)											
Mother & Father Marital Satisfaction (2)											
Mother's											
Punishment (3)	.441*	-.230									
Reward (4)	.118	.493*	-.159								
Punishment & Reward (5)	.356*	.325*	.415*	.832							
Father's											
Punishment (6)	-.056	.648*	-.355*	.030	-.171						
Reward (7)	.028	.760*	-.285	.272	.206	.609*					
Punishment & Reward (8)	-.029	.758*	-.285	.127	-.042	.951*	.824*				
Mother's Concept of Child (9)	-.392*	.150	-.412*	.369*	.108	.030	.179	.091			
Mother's Self-Concept (10)	-.308	-.168	-.238	.426*	.259	-.340*	-.173	-.310	.583*		
Father's Concept of Child (11)	-.182	.762*	-.239	.549*	.372*	.407*	.581*	.516*	.303	.072	
Father's Self-Concept (12)	-.136	.775*	-.141	.400*	.290	.400*	.549	.500*	.278	-.023	.727*

Table 3

Intercorrelations of Variables for Girls (N=34)

Variables	Variables (1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Self-Concept (1)											
Mother & Father Marital Satisfaction (2)											
Mother's											
Punishment (3)	-.029	-									
Reward (4)	-.037	-	.126								
Punishment & Reward (5)	-.044	-	.694*	.802*							
Father's											
Punishment (6)	-.153	-	.358*	.315*	.444*						
Reward (7)	-.201	-	-.027	.454*	.313*	.045					
Punishment & Reward (8)	-.247	-	.183	.541*	.503*	.608*	.821*				
Mother's Concept of Child (9)	.128	-	-.353*	.080	-.155	-.169	-.027	-.118			
Mother's Self-Concept (10)	060	-	-.273	.137	-.264	.191	-.052	.068	.622*		
Father's Concept of Child (11)	.107	-	.079	.281*	.252	-.003	.308*	.243	.203	-.018	
Father's Self-Concept (12)	-.275	-	.000	.378*	.274	.060	.165	.165	.250	-.003	.648*

The parents' ratings on marital satisfaction revealed that none of the girls' parents expressed dissatisfaction with their marriage; thus, it was impossible to examine the relationship between marital satisfaction and the other variables. All the correlations between the girls' self-concept scores on the Brown IDS and the other variables were insignificant ($p. > .05$) except for the negative relationship between the father's concept of self and the child's Brown IDS score.

The intercorrelations between the variables for the boys was much higher than for the girls. The correlations between marital satisfaction, the parent's use of authority, father's concept of child and father's self-concept are especially high for boys.

The strongest relationship was found between the boy's self-concept and his mother's use of authority, especially her use of punishment. The negative relationships of both mother's evaluation of herself and of her son with the child's self-concept score is a surprising finding since previous research (Taub, 1973, Tacco and Bridges, 1973) found a positive relationship between these variables.

Discussion

According to Mischel (1970) sex differences in such areas as level of overt aggression in boys and girls may be largely due to parents tolerating more overt aggressiveness from boys than girls. This contention is supported by the present findings that mothers and fathers of girls advocated the use of more control in parent-child interactions than mothers and fathers of boys. Droppleman and Schaefer (1961) found that boys and girls reported being treated different based on their sex. These findings support theories of sex-typing that rely primarily on the concept of reinforcement to explain

a large portion of the sex differences that exist in the behavior of pre-school children.

The correlation (r=.356) between mothers use of control and boys self-concept suggests that boys may profit from less freedom and more control. Support for this suggestion is provided by previous studies (Flynn, 1974, 1975) with disadvantaged boys (CA=3.5 - 4.5) which indicated that self-concept and self-control were highly related with both these variables related to the child's cognitive achievement.

The findings in the present study regarding the mean level of control advocated by the parents on Gordon's Use of Parental Authority measure would categorize parents of boys as moderately authoritarian and the parents of girls as considerable authoritarian according to Gordon (1970). It is probably as true of parental control as other characteristics of childrearing that the underlying relationship is curvilinear. Children may profit from a moderate amount of control but suffer from either too much or too little control. If the boys received as much control on the average as the girls, it is possible that exerting more control instead of being beneficial would be harmful to the boys' self-concept.

Since only the boys in the study had parents who expressed dissatisfaction with their marriage, the relationship between marital satisfaction and the child's self-concept for girls could not be calculated. It appears that both mothers and fathers who are satisfied with their marriage tend to advocate the use of more control with their sons. For the fathers both punishment and reward (r=.648 and r=.760 respectively) are related to marital satisfaction, while for the mothers only positive control (r=.493) is related to marital satisfaction. Two non-exclusive explanations for these relationships are possible. Parents who are satisfied with their marriage relation-

ship have more physical and psychological energy to invest in controlling their children's behavior. Also these parents will be likely to spend more time in the home with their children because of the congenial relationship with their spouse and thus be able to exert more control. The second explanation implies a more casual relationship between marital satisfaction and parental control. Parents who exert more control are apt to have boys whose behavior is more socialized and thus make the home situation more satisfying to the parents. There are probably several other explanations equally plausible but the significance of the finding is that marriage satisfaction is associated with parental control over their sons, which is contrary to Gordon's (1970) thesis and supports Coopersmith's (1967) findings regarding the positive relationship between fair but firm parental control and positive self-concept development.

The strong correlation between father's self-evaluation and marriage satisfaction (r=.162). Societies expectations regarding sex roles for men and women in marriage may explain this difference. The expectation is that men will be the head of the family and with a positive self-concept will be more likely to fulfill this expectation. Women with high self-concept would be more likely to expect equality rather than a subordinate helping role in the marital relationship which could create dissension in the marriage. Support for this contention is provided by the negative correlation between marriage satisfaction and mother's self-evaluation.

Because of the limitations of the study in regard to sample size and the one question measure of marital satisfaction the findings regarding marital satisfaction are suggestive and by no means conclusive. Further research is needed to investigate the relationship between marital satisfaction and the parents childrearing practices before applications of the present findings should be considered.

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